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ABSTRACT

Most of the federal government's support of disadvantaged young children has come through Head Start and Chapter 1 programs. Chapter 1 has mainly been used for pull-out remedial reading and mathematics programs in the elementary grades. The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) is concerned that Chapter 1 methods are inappropriate for younger children, and recommends that Chapter 1 be re-evaluated and restructured, especially in terms of the manner in which children are selected to participate, programs are evaluated, services are delivered, and programs are administered. Of special concern are the reliance of Chapter 1 on standardized testing for selection and program evaluation and the way in which its requirements interfere with cooperative learning. NAECS/SDE proposes that for Chapter 1 to effectively serve children through age eight, each state, district, and school must have its own Chapter 1 plan--a plan that meets the needs of its own children. It is also proposed that: (1) Chapter 1 programs be coordinated with other family-oriented publicly funded programs; (2) alternatives to pull-out programs be found; (3) state and local funds be used to match Chapter 1 at prekindergarten levels in order to encourage high quality full-day programs; (4) alternatives to standardized testing be found; and (5) emphasis be placed on staff training and parent involvement. (SAK)

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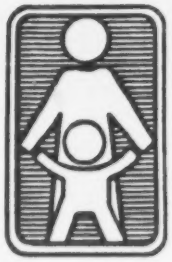

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

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CHAPTER 1 SERVICES AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: PROBLEM OR PROMISE

A Statement Prepared by the
National Association of Early Childhood Specialists
in State Departments of Education
Spring, 1991

This past quarter century witnessed a developing commitment on the part of the federal government toward increasing educational opportunities for children whose lives have been constrained by poverty and family disruption. For the youngest children, the majority of this assistance has come through Head Start and Chapter 1, programs administered through different federal agencies and operating on differing philosophical bases.

Head Start began with a family-oriented child development perspective. Although insufficient funding has limited its capacity to fully realize its mission to serve all eligible low income children and families, the wisdom of its comprehensive developmental orientation has been borne out in research conducted over nearly three decades. Head Start serves as the model for the development of many early care and education programs throughout the states; its focus has been on prevention of educational, social, health and other problems.

Chapter 1, which also recently celebrated its twenty-fifth birthday, was conceived as a program to enhance educational opportunities for disadvantaged children. It differs from Head Start in that it focuses on alleviating educational deprivation; Chapter 1 has a remedial approach to service delivery. Some school districts have used Chapter 1 resources to serve prekindergarten and early primary children, but the major use of Chapter 1 resources has been for pull-out remedial reading and math programs beginning in later primary and extending throughout the elementary grades.

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As it becomes more and more evident that early investments in young children and their families make a significant difference in children's capacity to benefit from elementary and secondary schooling, schools and other community agencies serving young children are searching for additional financial resources to establish preschool as well as family support and education programs. More schools are recognizing Chapter 1 as one funding source for new and expanded programs. It also appears likely that Congress views an expansion of Chapter 1 as one vehicle for an enhanced federal investment in younger children.

THE PROBLEM: Why NAECS/SDE Is Concerned

Since Chapter 1 was not originally conceived as a program for young children, some of its practices are in conflict with what is widely accepted as beneficial practice in the early years. The members of NAECS/SDE strongly compliment federal Chapter 1 staff and other U. S. Department of Education officials for recent expressions of interest in greater collaboration among programs and for promoting greater flexibility in the interpretation of the requirements. However, NAECS/SDE believes that further regulatory and operational changes are needed at the federal and state levels to assure that current and future Chapter 1 programs provide the greatest possible benefit to children and contribute to the achievement of the National Goals for Education. After twenty-five years, it is fitting and appropriate that Chapter 1 is reevaluated and restructured incorporating more integrated and developmentally appropriate practices to serve young children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The members of NAECS/SDE urge reform in these areas:

- how children are selected to participate
- how programs are evaluated
- how services are delivered
- how programs are administered

Underlying all these areas of concern is alarm about how Chapter 1 practices tend to influence curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment of all children in the entire school.

Discussion of the issues outlined above immediately leads to concern about the role of standardized tests in (1) selecting Chapter 1 students, (2) program evaluation, and (3) mode of service delivery. After two decades of expanded use of standardized norm-referenced tests with younger and younger children, many states are now rethinking assessment programs. Some states are even moving toward more instructionally informative means of monitoring children's progress in the early years and about a half dozen have policies prohibiting the use of standardized norm-referenced tests with children during the kindergarten/primary years.

Although Chapter 1 regulations do appear to permit the use of more flexible criteria for the selection of children to be served and do not require the use of standardized instruments for program evaluation until the beginning of second grade, most schools persist in their dependence on standardized norm-referenced tests both for selection of children and for program evaluation. State and school district officials defend the use of the same test for both purposes as a way to reduce the overall time devoted to testing.

Even though this use appears to be a worthwhile goal, the insufficiencies of standardized norm-referenced tests as markers for achievement with young children are well-documented. Furthermore, their use as markers helps ensure that district level programs become ever increasingly based on diagnosing what is wrong with the child and prescribing a "bits-and-pieces" approach to teaching. This is exactly the wrong approach to use with a child who is already convinced that s/he is a failure. In spite of assurances by federal Chapter 1 officials that such dependence on standardized norm-referenced tests is neither required nor favored, the practice and the problems persist.

Chapter 1 regulations do permit flexibility through the use of statistically drawn samples for program evaluation. This option is unavailable, however, to the majority of schools, because only the largest districts serve sufficient Chapter 1 eligible children to have a population large enough to use sampling techniques. Chapter 1 regulations also permit the use of criterion-referenced tests which have been subjected to statistical equating procedures to yield nationally aggregatable data. However, many districts lack staff with the necessary time and technical background to carry out the equating procedures. Consequently, the standardized tests drive not only the Chapter 1 services, but have a negative effect on the entire kindergarten and primary program in many schools across the nation.

There is wide agreement that young children benefit from learning environments which involve them actively, provide a rich and relevant linguistic environment, integrate subject matter, accept varying rates of development in the early years, integrate children of varying backgrounds and capacities, encourage a problem solving perspective, and promote independence in learning. Dependence on standardized tests tends to drive programs in directions inconsistent with such good early education practices. Test driven programs are commonly characterized by instruction in discrete skills, little natural conversation, use of ability groups, and little or no opportunity to engage in problem solving behaviors. Many teachers and administrators report that Chapter 1 requirements constrain their ability to move toward more developmentally appropriate practices in the kindergarten and primary years. Thus, a program conceived to be of assistance to disadvantaged children, has, by the institutionalization of some of its practices, limited reform efforts in many schools.

Requirements that Chapter 1 funds be used only to supplement the district's regular education programs have resulted in a service delivery model which is inconsistent with good early education practices. The positive effects of heterogeneous grouping are well-documented, yet many teachers feel it is extremely difficult to place educationally disadvantaged children in a grouping which includes non-disadvantaged children without the implementation of a pull-out program based on ability grouping. However, when children are pulled out for remedial instruction, they miss out on participation in a well rounded curriculum and the scheduling of ancillary teachers tends to determine the schedule of the entire class. More and more special programs, not only Chapter 1, are eroding opportunities for children to utilize sufficient blocks of time to pursue projects in depth. Many educators are alarmed at the fragmentation of the school day for young children and of the amount of time children spend traveling from teacher to teacher. Furthermore, virtually every education reform document discusses the importance of learning experiences which promote the integration of subject areas so that children can apply communication and problem solving skills in such projects. Pullout programs prevent this integration.

Even when schools pursue an integrated within-classroom service approach, the Chapter 1 teacher often times is allowed to work only with identified Chapter 1 students. This limitation precludes cooperative learning activities and continues the detrimental practice of ability grouping within the classroom setting. Again, the purpose of the Chapter 1 requirements is worthwhile--to assure that the resources are directed to the most needy children. However, the effect of perpetuating ability grouping is counterproductive for the very students the program is designed to serve.

REALIZING THE PROMISE

The 1993 reauthorization of Chapter 1 provides an opportunity to craft legislation which will permit the states and local schools to respond to the growing consensus about beneficial approaches to assist young children from disadvantaged backgrounds. NAECS/SDE proposes the following suggestions regarding how Chapter 1 might better serve children in the early childhood years through age eight:

1) To be eligible for federal categorical funding (Chapter 1, Special Education, Bilingual, etc.), each state should be required to formulate a plan which reflects the state's philosophy for serving young children in special populations. The plan should reflect the state's perspective of early childhood education and outline how the sources of categorical funding will fit into a comprehensive plan for meeting the needs of all young children in the state.

2) Likewise, each district and each eligible school within districts eligible for categorical funding should be required to set out a similar plan reflecting local needs and strategies for meeting those needs.

3) Chapter 1 requirements and those of other federal education, health, and social service programs should be modified to make it possible for families to gain access to a range of services at a single point of access. Families living in Chapter 1 eligible schools are often eligible for other publicly funded programs. The most effective approaches involving young children are comprehensive and family oriented.

4) Since a primary goal should be to support high quality programs serving the needs of all children, alternatives to both pull-out programs in the elementary school and segregated programs in the prekindergarten must be found. For example, team teaching arrangements in which the regular classroom teacher and the Chapter 1 funded teacher work interchangeably with all children can both provide a superior education program for all children, particularly those qualified for Chapter 1, and also eliminate stigmatizing effects of pullout programs.

5) At the prekindergarten level, the protection against supplanting should be based on state and local match or requirements for maintenance of effort. This approach would permit the blending of funding sources and mitigate against the creation or perpetuation of segregated programs and would also increase the likelihood of schools providing full-day education and care programs. The common pattern of part day programs with children going off to low quality child care or self care exacerbates their educational disadvantage.

6) Requirements for year by year administration of norm-referenced standardized tests should be replaced by careful monitoring of input standards which have been demonstrated to produce quality outcomes for children in the early years. At the local level, progress should be monitored continuously through analysis of work samples and observation-based documentation. Program evaluation should focus on the totality of children's development - - social, emotional and physical - - not just achievement which has historically been the Chapter 1 perspective. Standardized testing should not be required before the fourth grade.The current Chapter 1 approach to assessment varies considerably from what is being advocated by early education experts and a growing number of assessment reformers. Current evaluation requirements perpetuate inappropriate instructional methods and isolate Chapter 1 students from exciting and challenging experiences.

7) The body of research which supports the contribution early childhood programs can make to the development and subsequent school success of low income children demonstrates the importance of high quality inputs to resultant high outcomes for children. An analysis of inputs such as staff training levels, adult/child ratios, level of parent involvement, and program definition show greater promise for evaluating program success during the early childhood years than does the use of standardized tests.

IN SUMMARY

In the fall of 1990, a memorandum issued jointly by the U. S. Department of Education and the Administration for Children, Youth and Families was sent to all schools in the nation. The memorandum emphasized the importance of smooth transitions for children moving from Head Start and other prekindergarten programs into elementary school. The memorandum also emphasized the importance of developmentally appropriate curriculum and continuity across programs. Continuity of program experiences is critical to the success of Head Start children, whose circumstances make them vulnerable to risks of social and educational problems,and continuity is important to all other children as well. Pronounced discrepancies between school program expectations and the prior experiences of young children can predispose them to disaffection and failure and their parents to confusion and loss of confidence in the schools and/or their own children's potential.

Integral to developmentally appropriate practices is documentation of children's performance in actual learning situations and tasks, not narrow samples removed from meaningful contexts. Adequate sampling of young children's performance requires multiple sources of information, obtained in a variety of situations and at numerous points in time. Only in so doing, can we be confident that assessment for selection and program evaluation is valid and reliable.

Chapter 1 programs have the potential to provide quality beginnings for young learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The potential for changing practices is within our grasp. Ignoring the problem is to deny the promise of success to those most in need.